

CLAIMS

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1. A process using a computer network to facilitate the purchase of a product having multiple configurations, the product being sold by manufacturer-licensed sellers and each product configuration being described by a set of product attributes, comprising:
- configuring a customer's desired product by selecting the customer's desired set of product attributes;
 - selecting a target set of sellers in the customer's geographical area, the target set comprising at least one seller;
 - transmitting a request for quote (RFQ) to the target set of sellers, the RFQ including the customer's desired set of product attributes and the RFQ being transmitted using the computer network to a seller subsystem;
 - responding to the RFQ with a quote from at least one seller from the target set of sellers, the quote being input through the seller subsystem and transmitted using the computer network;
 - transmitting the quotes to the customer;
 - selecting for acceptance a price quote that matches the customer's attributes; and
 - transmitting the customer's acceptance to the seller.
2. The process of claim 1 wherein configuring a customer's desired product comprises:
- transmitting the customer's desired set of product attributes to an intermediary;
 - inputting the customer's product attributes into an intermediary subsystem; and
 - querying an electronic database of existing product configurations, using the customer's desired set of product attributes, to assess the feasibility of the customer's selected configuration.
3. The process of claim 2 further comprising transmitting the customer's desired set of product attributes to a second intermediary.
4. The process of claim 1 wherein configuring a customer's desired product comprises:
- inputting the customer's product attributes into a computer through a customer subsystem;
 - querying an electronic database of existing product configurations, using the customer's desired set of product attributes, to assess the feasibility of the customer's selected configuration; and

transmitting the customer's attribute set to an intermediary.

5. The process of claim 4 further comprising transmitting the customer's desired set of attributes to a second intermediary.
6. The process of claim 1 wherein at least one attribute in the set of product attributes is ranked by the customer on a scale which indicates their degree of flexibility about that attribute.
7. The process of claim 1 wherein responding to the RFQ with a quote comprises:
 - querying an electronic database of existing product configurations, using the customer's desired set of product attributes, to assess the feasibility of an alternate product configuration; and
 - assembling a quote based upon the alternate product configuration.
8. The process of claim 1 wherein transmitting the RFQ to a target set of dealers comprises:
 - transmitting the RFQ from an intermediary to a server; and
 - transmitting the RFQ from the server to the target set of sellers.
9. The process of claim 1 wherein responding to the RFQ comprises:
 - transmitting a quote from at least one seller from the target set of sellers to a server; and
 - transmitting the quote from the server to an intermediary.
10. The process of claim 1 where the quotes are transmitted by the intermediary to the customer using a telephone, electronic mail or fax.
11. The process of claim 1 wherein selecting a target set of sellers comprises:
 - querying a database of product sellers based on a set of seller criteria; and
 - selecting the target set of product sellers from the query results.
12. The process of claim 11 further comprising storing a list of the target set of sellers on the seller database as a preferred seller list.
13. The process of claim 6 wherein selecting a target set of sellers further comprises filtering the query result based on additional seller criteria.
14. The process of claim 1 wherein transmitting the price quotes to the customer comprises:
 - transmitting the price quotes to an intermediary using an intermediary subsystem; and
 - transmitting the price quotes to the customer using a customer subsystem.

15. The process of claim 1 further comprising notifying the target set of sellers that an RFQ has been transmitted to them.
16. The process of claim 1 further comprising storing each RFQ in an RFQ database.
17. The process of claim 16 further comprising tracking the status of each RFQ.
18. The process of claim 1 further comprising:
 - inputting a set of customer information; and
 - storing the set of customer information in a customer database.
19. The process of claim 17 further comprising tracking customer information to obtain marketing information.
20. A computer network apparatus to facilitate the purchase of a product having multiple configurations, the product being sold by manufacturer-licensed sellers and each product configuration being described by a set of product attributes, comprising:
 - a server comprising:
 - a processor,
 - a storage device connected to the processor,
 - a product database stored on the storage device, the product database including information regarding existing combinations of product attributes,
 - a seller database stored on the storage device, the seller database including seller information such as geographic location,
 - a program stored on the storage device for controlling the processor, the program being operative with the processor to
 - receive a customer's selected set of product attributes,
 - query the product database using the customer's desired set of product attributes to confirm the feasibility of the customer's selected configuration,
 - query the seller database using a set of seller attributes to select a target set of sellers in the customer's geographic area,

transmit a request for quote (RFQ) to the target set of sellers, the RFQ including the customer's desired set of product attributes,

receive a quote from at least one seller from the target set of sellers,

receive an acceptance of one of the quotes, and

transmit the acceptance to the seller whose quote was accepted;

an intermediary subsystem connected to the server, the intermediary subsystem comprising a computer operative with a program stored thereon to:

receive from an intermediary input of a customer's selected set of product attributes,

transmit to the server the customer's selected set of product attributes,

receive from the server a quote from a seller,

receive from the intermediary input of an acceptance of a quote, and

transmit to the server an acceptance of one of the quotes; and

a seller subsystem connected to the server, the seller subsystem comprising a computer operative with a program stored thereon to:

receive from the server an RFQ;

receive from a seller input of a quote in response to the RFQ, and

transmit the quote to the server.

21. The apparatus of claim 20 further comprising a customer subsystem, the customer subsystem comprising a computer operative with a program stored thereon to:

receive from a customer input of the customer's selected set of product attributes;

and

transmit the selected set of product attributes to the server.

22. The apparatus of claim 21 wherein the intermediary subsystem is further operative with the program stored thereon to receive from the server a customer's desired set of configuration attributes.
23. The apparatus of claim 20 wherein the intermediary subsystem comprises a computer having a program and a second product database stored thereon, the program being operative with the computer to
 - receive input of a customer's selected set of product attributes;
 - query the second product database using the customer's desired set of product attributes to confirm the feasibility of the customer's selected configuration, and
 - transmit to the server the customer's desired set of product attributes.
24. The apparatus of claim 20 further comprising an RFQ database stored on the server's storage device, the program stored on the server's storage device being further operative with the processor to:
 - store RFQ's processed by the apparatus in the RFQ database, and
 - track the status of each RFQ in the database.
25. The apparatus of claim 20 further comprising a customer database stored on the storage device, the program being further operative with the processor to:
 - store customer information in the customer database, and
 - update the customer information when new customer information is received.
26. The apparatus of claim 25 wherein the customer information is stored on the customer database in lists, each list being an intermediary's customer list.
27. The apparatus of claim 25 wherein the program is further operative with the processor to track customer information.
28. The apparatus of claim 20 wherein the program stored on the storage device of the server is further operative to store a list of target sellers as a preferred seller list.
29. A computer network apparatus to facilitate the purchase of a product having multiple configurations, the product being sold by manufacturer-licensed sellers and each product configuration being described by a set of product attributes, comprising:
 - a server comprising:

a processor,

a storage device connected to the processor,

a product database stored on the storage device, the product database including information regarding existing combinations of product attributes,

a seller database stored on the storage device, the seller database including seller information such as geographic location,

a program stored on the storage device for controlling the processor, the program being operative with the processor to

receive a customer's selected set of product attributes,

query the product database using the customer's desired set of product attributes to confirm the feasibility of the customer's selected configuration,

query the seller database using a set of seller attributes to select a target set of sellers in the customer's geographic area,

transmit a request for quote (RFQ) to the target set of sellers, the RFQ including the customer's desired set of product attributes,

receive a quote from at least one seller from the target set of sellers,

receive an acceptance of one of the quotes, and

transmit the acceptance to the seller whose quote was accepted;

a customer subsystem; the customer subsystem comprising a computer operative with a program stored thereon to:

receive from a customer input of the customer's selected set of product attributes,

transmit to the server the customer's selected set of product attributes,

receive from the server a quote from a seller,

receive from the customer input of an acceptance of a quote, and

transmit to the server an acceptance of one of the quotes; and

a seller subsystem, the seller subsystem comprising a computer operative with a program stored thereon to:

display the contents of an RFQ to a seller,

receive from a seller input of a quote in response to the RFQ, and

transmit the quote to the server.

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